

# John Dewey and the Beginnings of Progressive Early Education in Hawai'i

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Hawai'i has often been the beneficiary of the insights of extraordinary men and women who visited the islands and made important observations. Among these was perhaps America's most famous philosopher, John Dewey (1859-1952). First visiting Honolulu in 1899 as the guest of Mary Tenney Castle and her family, Dewey would help establish Hawai'i's first progressive kindergartens while also assisting in the establishment of the new progressive Castle Kindergarten on King Street. Dewey was a close friend of his University of Chicago colleague and symbolic interactionist George Herbert Mead and his wife Helen Castle. He had met the late Henry Castle, a young philosopher whose life had been cut short in a shipping accident on the North Sea, in 1895. Dewey's visit coincided with the incipient efforts of educators to formulate a radical re-engineering of early education, which would forever change the way the public looked at young children and eventually lead to a comprehensive K-12 public education for the territory, and then the state, of Hawai'i.

Dewey's intellectual journey from traditional epistemological Hegelian-style idealism to the instrumentalism now associated with his famous name was well developed by the end of the nineteenth century. Perhaps his best description of his intellectual position was described in his 1929 book *The Quest for Certainty*. The positions he articulates in this book framed his basic educational philosophy, which he would apply to Hawai'i's early progressive kindergartens and especially to the Henry and Dorothy Memorial Kindergarten and its teachers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The historical quest for certainty about which Dewey writes, and which he deplores, has a long lineage. It originated in man's search for security from the perils of the natural world, a search that resulted in a comfort in manufactured realms of eternal truth and transcendent reality. Over the ages, Dewey concludes, mankind, at least in most cultures, created a set of empirical practices that allowed them to deal with the inferior realm of material

reality called "practice" while reserving the higher order "theory" for the transcendent, changeless divine realm. Mystery and glamour attached to the eternal, sempiternal realm, while the material or "practical" realm was deemed inferior. The separation of the two conceptual orders was mirrored in the distinction between practice and theory. This isolation of theory and practice has, in Dewey's estimation, held mankind back for centuries.

The devaluing of the natural realm of the changing and flawed mundane world was regnant, according to Dewey, until the early modern period when Galileo, Newton, and Bacon began the slow process of taking the natural world as worthy of precise quantitative interpretation. Over time, science rid itself of the last vestiges of the illusory search for ultimate, invariable reality and became more secure with experimentalism and operationalism. As a result of this development, which, Dewey believed, is fundamental to modernity, mankind came to see values as not permanently fixed and hierarchical, but relational, instrumental, and corrigible. Mankind thus possesses the method and means, through observation, experiment, and interpretation, to wrestle meaning and provisional truth from the realm of nature.

For Dewey the pragmatist, mankind was still in the process of removing the manufactured barriers between knowledge and practice, science and values, and the noxious false problems, such as the relationship between mind and body, spirit and matter, theory and practice—between an ultimate Truth and flexible, instrumental, provisional truths. For him, nature is the origin of all ideals and goods vouchsafed to mankind. Men's minds were now free to jettison the search for illusionary certainty and to pursue discoverable, multiple paths to enjoyable goods defined not by gods but by humans. From the hazards of mutable nature, man could find no redoubt. But in nature he could use ideas as instruments for action that could achieve partial, corrigible truths and multiple goods.

The basic framework above, often called metaphysical naturalism, had shaped Dewey's educational philosophy by the late nineteenth century. His theory, which would help to shape education for the twentieth century, resulted from his rejection of the rigid and formal approach to education that dominated schools in the late nineteenth century. Such an approach was incorrect, he argued, because it was based upon an erroneous psychology in which the child was thought of as a passive creature upon whom information and ideas had to be imposed.

Equally distressing to Dewey was an education based on sentiment and idealization of the child. This approach urged the child to choose what he wanted to study. For Dewey, this approach ignored the lack of sophistication of the child's experience. For the child, education ought to be a continuous reconstruction of experience in which practical problems were solved through trial and error. Once solutions were found, future solutions to identical problems would become part of a child's habits and intelligence. Dewey's slogan, "Learn by Doing," was meant to call attention to the child as a naturally active, curious, and exploring creature. Any properly planned education, therefore, should be sensitive to this active dimension of life and must guide the child in such a way as to maximize his or her participation in different types of experience. The end of education must be development of the child's creativity and autonomy.

As Dewey saw it, the child's nature is neither completely malleable nor forever fixed. Like Aristotle, Dewey believed that the function of education is to encourage those habits and tendencies that constitute intelligence. Dewey stressed creating the proper type of environmental conditions for eliciting and nurturing these habits. In the correct and controlled environment, adaptive lifetime habits could be formed. Moreover, education, as the continuous reconstruction and growth of experience, also develops the child's moral character. Virtue is taught by cultivating self-mindedness, objectivity, imagination, openness to new experiences, and the courage to change one's mind in the light of new facts.

Dewey thought the school was best understood as a miniature society; as such, it should be representative of the essential institutions of this society. As an ideal society, the school is the chief means of social reform. In the controlled social environment of the school, trained teachers could

develop creative individuals who could work effectively to eliminate existing social evils and build a better society. For Dewey, the school was the medium for developing habits for systematic inquiry and for tolerance of the new and untried.

In a rapidly industrializing America, Dewey feared the threat to the future of democratic practice posed by unplanned technological, economic, and political development. These rapid and unplanned changes, he also feared, would increase human aberration and decrease the amount of shared experience that is vital for the democratic community. For him and for his followers, the school in a democratic society was the best hope for creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all could share and participate.

Dewey, introduced to the Castle family by G. H. Mead, was soon in contact with Mary Castle about funds for the University of Chicago Lab School and about coming to Honolulu to help start the progressive Castle Kindergarten on King Street.

Like Dewey, Mary Castle understood that if education was to be relevant and meaningful, it would need to be transformed. Moreover, they wanted education to constantly expand the range of social situations in which individuals perceived issues and made and acted upon choices. They wanted schools to inculcate habits that would enable individuals to control their surroundings rather than merely adapt to them. Traditional formal education, which emphasized memorization and conformity to lessons taught by an authoritarian teacher, was incapable of providing an education that would improve society by making it more "worthy and harmonious" (Cremin, 1964, p. 118). No longer isolated from the reality of a quickly changing society, the progressive school would become "an embryonic community life," active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society. As Dewey said,

When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely and harmonious. (Dewey, 1899, p. 51)

Dewey's educational theory included a condemnation of "the old school" for the passivity of its methods and

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the rigid uniformity of its curriculum. For too long the educational center of gravity had been “in the teacher, the textbook, anywhere and everywhere you please except in the immediate instincts and activities of the child himself” (Dewey, 1899, p. 51). The essence of the new pedagogy was to shift this center of gravity back to the child. The business of the new school would be

to not only facilitate and enrich the growth of the individual child, but also to supply the same results, and for some, technical information and discipline that have been the ideas of education in the past. (Dewey, 1899, p. 70)

For Mary and her daughter Harriet, education at the kindergarten level must “develop in these citizens of today as well as tomorrow the habits, attitudes, appreciations, and skills necessary for the life in democracy.” Furthermore, this primary instruction would provide miniature democracies where “situations arise which give opportunity for the development of . . . habits, attitudes, appreciations, and skills necessary for life.” Perhaps most importantly, young pupils would be taught to think for themselves, to reason, to judge and to evaluate the facts of experience. Since environments change, set and static standards of conduct would not be enough. Morality, correctly understood, “is an active attitude, not a passive one. Habit must be formed through action. We must learn to be good.” Kindergarten education, through teaching perseverance, flexibility, cooperation, initiative, self-control, and life-long reasoning skills, would provide citizens capable of sustaining both democracy and progress in social institutions (Babbitt, 1948, pp. 79–88).

Dewey viewed the teacher’s role as that of a skilled guide. The kindergarten teacher should create ideal situations for both sense training and discipline of thought. All instruction should recall that thinking does not occur for its own sake. Rather, “it arises from the need of meeting some difficulty, in reflecting upon the best way of overcoming it, and thus leads to planning . . . mentally the results to be reached and deciding upon the steps necessary and their serial order.”<sup>1</sup> Dewey claimed that this was the best preparation for pure speculation or abstract investigation. Thought, Dewey argued, begins with a difficulty, moves through a resolution, and may appropriately end with an abstract speculation or

abstraction. In this last stage, solutions to difficulties or problems may be generalized to similar difficulties or problems.

In 1899, in an effort to memorialize her son and granddaughter Henry and Dorothy Castle, Mary Castle invited Dewey to journey to Honolulu and, as her houseguest in Mānoa, to lecture on his theories as part of university extension work. In addition, she invited him to assist in the formation of the Henry and Dorothy Castle Memorial Kindergarten. The invitation, delivered by his close friend George Herbert Mead and his wife Helen Castle, intrigued Dewey from the start. Dewey was grateful for Castle Foundation support for his new University of Chicago Lab School and, moreover, Hawai‘i’s pluralist and diverse racial and cultural population would test his progressive theories. He was especially interested in the forms early education would take in a society with great tolerance for racial differences. In essence, Hawai‘i seemed a good place to test his theories in a different cultural environment, one that had avoided the kind of racial segregation Chicago suffered from, while giving him the opportunity to impact teacher training in the islands.

Dewey’s five lectures on *The Life of the Child*, delivered at the city’s high school, provided him the chance to reassert his basic approach to education. His constant theme was the wide possibilities for learning for the active child learner in guided child-centered kindergarten education.<sup>2</sup> During his visits to the Castle Kindergarten and its educators, he also noted the multi-racial characteristics of that center. He certainly had to note the ardor with which the children of plantation parents sought out the Standard English language taught there and the emphasis on liberal democratic political culture. Though the many assimilationist features of the school would later be criticized by some, Dewey saw the necessity of preparing children to be life-long learners who would be voting citizens in a republic. In 1899, Hawai‘i was, with its oligarchic political and economic features, along with its high rates of immigration, a place where democracy and faith in secular liberal democratic ideals had yet to fully develop. Dewey clearly agreed with Mary Castle that the time to transform early education had come and that in that transformation lay one of the best opportunities for Hawai‘i’s political and economic culture to be transformed in important egalitarian ways.<sup>3</sup>

Less apparent, perhaps, was the fact that so many Hawaiian parents had chosen to send children to progressive venues like the FKCAA and the Castle Kindergarten. One might note that the Hawaiian language and culture stressed at home was intended to work with Standard English. Hawaiians enrolled children at only a slightly lesser rate than Caucasians and Asians in part because of the cultural respect, but also because Dewey's ideas about progressive education seemed to mirror traditional Hawaiian ways of learning and teaching. Although not formally studied until the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the primary aspects of this learning are generally agreed upon by scholars of Hawaiian history and culture. Scholars such as Kekuni Blaisdell and Manulani Aluli Meyer have noted the following key aspects of Hawaiian learning, which were broadly consistent with the constructivist pedagogical theory of Dewey and may explain why Hawaiian enrollment in many progressive kindergartens was relatively high:

- A. In traditional Hawaiian ways of knowing and learning, the child develops meaning and knowledge from actual interaction with its environment and practice in accomplishing tasks guided by the teacher. Meaning and knowledge, far from being derived from access to an eternal realm of unchanging truths or Platonic forms, is wrestled from the material world of objects that the child encounters in achieving solutions to practical problems.
- B. In traditional Hawaiian ways of learning, the child took place in a social context where the child would learn proper balance between individual pursuits and special necessity. Developing harmony with other children and with the land, learning reciprocity and generosity, and learning the correct relationship that makes society possible were all keys to early childhood education. Dewey's views of how education makes democratic society possible combined with his (and Mead's) sense of how ideas, beliefs, meaning, and knowledge are constructed within a social context makes for some important similarities in instructional similarities.
- C. For Hawaiians, as for Dewey, there could be no separation of mind and body as there has been for Descartes and generations of Western scholars. For both, knowledge was embodied, physical, unmediated,

and experiential. Hawaiians speak of "na'au" for the sense that knowledge is incorporated in physical bodies and "felt" in immediate ways.

- D. For Dewey, as for Hawaiians, learning is viewed as an activity and is characterized by physical engagement with the environment. Guided by teachers, the child-centered approach to learning involved the five senses and "learning by doing" in a manner that allowed the child to overcome challenges and problems while receiving feedback. For both Dewey and Hawaiians, the child's reward in learning was to solve problems that were real, embedded in society, and practical. Learning was not abstract, but rather specific and accumulative.
- E. For both, learning took place in a community and was embedded in natural and human relationships. Nor need learning be only an individualistic, competitive enterprise. For Dewey and Hawaiians, learning can be and often should be communal, cooperative, and responsive to social relationships. For both, learning took place in a world where there was no separation of nature, life, and society. In a profound way, learning takes place where there is no separation between mind, nature, society, and the child.

Scholars have noted how mainstream public schools in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries lost the chance to capture the affection of many Hawaiian families with their traditional ways of teaching imported from New England in the first half of the nineteenth century. Individual competition, rote memorization, stationary, indoor desks, teacher-centered learning, and "one size fits all" approaches to teaching tended to be less popular than the progressive, flexible child-centered approaches formulated by Dewey's educational theory. Although there is no indication that any of his ideas were formulated through study of Hawaiian ways of learning, he could not fail to note the high participation rates of many Hawaiian families in the incipient private progressive kindergartens in Honolulu. The fact that some of the teachers were Hawaiian and the fact that Hawaiian culture was, to an extent, honored may also have contributed to the positive reception the progressive kindergartens had in the late 1890's and for years beyond that.

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John Dewey's international fame has led to him being studied by scholars around the world. Though not all of his ideas and ideals have stood the test of time, his work in Hawai'i in helping to shape progressive education is a relatively unknown part of a long, creative, and valuable life.

## REFERENCES

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- Dewey, J. (1899). The school and society. Chicago, IL: D. Appleton-Century.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Harriet Castle, Notes on Dewey's ideas in FKCAA Archives.
- <sup>2</sup> For a summary of Dewey's lectures in Honolulu, see *The Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, August 8, 1899.
- <sup>3</sup> For a lengthy examination of Dewey's influence on the pedagogy of the Henry and Dorothy Castle Memorial Kindergarten, see Alfred L. Castle, *A Century of Philanthropy: A History of the Samuel N. & Mary Castle Foundation* (Hawaiian Historical Society, 2004) 48-65.